

The Full Fonty

By John Hedges

A couple of years ago I did "The Full Monty". I wasn't one of the bottoms, but a backstage helper in an amateur production of the American musical developed from the British film. The essence of the story is the same as the film, a group of unemployed men find respect and self-esteem in stripping in front of a large audience after much soul-searching along the way. It's an extremely good show if you ever have the chance to see it, good comedy, poignant in places and some of the music is memorable. It was top fun, the best show I've done recently partly because of its grown-up environment.

But the show set me pondering. Pondering a lot about the way British society has evolved over the past 30 to 40 years and musing about the changed roles of the sexes in society.

My group, the Frome Amateur Operatic Society, is a decorous, musicals company in the south-west of England that has competently and confidently fed off a diet of Gilbert and Sullivan, Oklahoma, Cinderella, etc for over 100 years. "The Full Monty" shook that culture decidedly.

I've done towards 20 shows with FAOS, but right from its inception I noticed that Monty was a unique show. It had a number of firsts for FAOS - first nudity, first gay character, first black character - but what makes it especially different was its impact on the women involved, not just the actresses, but also in the production team, in the Society, on the streets, in the audience and all over Frome. In the year of preparation, I never once talked to any women about the show without seeing happy-faced excitement, sometimes writ large. And I wasn't the only one, for the FAOS executive picked this up early and responded by setting up a ladies' night for one of the performances.

It's obvious why of course, but just to state the point - women like men. In their genes women like men to be sexual. Privately or otherwise women like to look at men naked. Of course. 150,000 years of the development of our own species alone have ensured that. It has to be that way else we would not be here. But in our modern, western, feminised world, here's a further thought - men like women. In their genes men like women to be sexual. Privately or otherwise men like to look at women naked. Of course. 150,000 years of the development of our own species alone

In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement was conceived, asked difficult questions, challenged established thinking, broke down the indefensible, and western society lived

through one of its most fundamental changes, as most of us came to realise that, biological tasks aside, free-will, not gender, should be the only deciding factor on what individuals do and can do in the World. Bearing in mind where I'm going in this essay, I state that I was and remain a supporter of the philosophies of the movement.

Among many other things, we heard about the objectifying of women and we learned that women shouldn't be treated as sexual objects. But here's a thought - Is men's sexual enjoyment nowadays allowed to be equal to women's? It used to be that men in some environments could openly enjoy naked women. But now, in searching the Internet, I can't find in Britain a single example of what I would call an old-fashioned strip show - straight theatrical shows with women stripping for men (I exclude lap dancing because prick teasing is not the same thing). Why? The National Operatic and Dramatic Association will tell you that "The Full Monty" is being played all over the country and right now it's the most popular show for amateur musicals groups. If women can peacefully enjoy naked men, why can men no longer enjoy naked women?

Has women's liberation made us equal, or has the see-saw gone too far in the opposite direction? Consider. What would have happened if it had been decided to put on exactly the same show but with the gender roles exactly reversed? "The Full Fonty", if you will. Would that have been acceptable? Could men have celebrated in the same way? Would women have tolerated it? To make the point, here are some extracts from such a show, exactly as we played it but with the roles reversed:

It's Gentlemen's Night. The only women in the Theatre are in the cast and crew. There are a few male cast members planted in the audience. The show starts with an actor coming through the curtains. "Welcome to boys night out" (Ecstatic cheers) "I told my wife Georgie (she's home changing the oil in the engine)" ... Derision and raspberries. He introduces a stripper Girlie Walsh who comes through the curtains. She's dressed in a business suit. She starts to strip to raunchy, stripper music. The Audience Plants shout, cheer and yock it up. The audience immediately follows suit. Girlie strips down to her skirt and then beckons one of the Plants to come up onto stage. He does. He strokes her legs, he puts his hand through her legs, he pulls off her velcroed skirt. Girlie now wears nothing but a g-string.

Later during the show - Scene in a ladies' toilet. Men burst in. "Gentlemen, welcome to the inner sanctum of the American female". They sing "It's a Man's World". Later - auditions for members of the stripping group. A couple of woman comes on, do unsexy strips (wigs falls off, can't get clothes off, etc) down to their g-strings. Another woman comes on, can't dance, can't sing. "Why do you think you might be suitable?" She turns her back on the audience, exposes herself and the women judges jump back in surprise. Clearly she has some startling physical characteristic. Somewhere along the way there's

a breast enlargement routine, with a prop bought from a sex shop. In a similar vein it continues throughout the show. The stage crew gets quite used to seeing women in g-strings standing around. No one's much phased any more.

Now we're into the finale. There's an enormous, lit sign at the back "THE FULL FONTY". The six women come on and do their strip routine, whipping up the audience. The cheering and whooping in the male-only audience becomes deafening. The strippers get down to their knickers and go into final bows. In the audience a plant shouts "We were promised The Full Fonty!". The plants start a clapping chant "Hey, hey, whadda ya say, Buffalo girls go all the way!" The audience takes it up. The strippers let it go for a while until the lead player steps forward and hushes them. "Ladies, we only live once!" Of come the knickers. They are down to their g-strings. In a line they turn and walk upstage. Off come the g-strings. They're fully naked now with their backs to the audience. Their hats come off and are strategically placed, in front, between the legs. They turn. In one carefully rehearsed move, up go the hats and "THE FULL FONTY" sign is switched to full power. The audience are blinded, they can't see anything, but the men in the audience don't care, they've had the best time ever.

So that would be "The Full Fonty". What do you think? Could such a show be put on in Britain today?

I don't think so.

Wrong. I know so. I can read. I can hear. I know how today's society is.

Our society has become feminised in a crude, thoughtless, heavy footed, my opinion's worth more than yours, kind of way. A country that tolerates, celebrates even, "The Full Monty" would I am sure (no hesitation, no doubts) publicly vilify the equal but opposite. A proposition to place six women stripping in front of a large, baying, cheering audience of men. Can you imagine the reaction? The feminists, the mainstream press, the knee-jerkers, would slit throats. "How dare men objectify women like this!"

Except they wouldn't be actually, any more than the women of Frome were objectifying men that Friday last year. What the women were doing was enjoying men's bodies and joyously celebrating the atmosphere of sexuality and their own permitted gratification. Of course. Their genes ensure that. Our species' evolution alone has resulted in a raw, necessary sexuality, which when released burns brightly.

And there's the nub. For were it the other way round so it would be for a male audience. Not objectifying the women but enjoying the bodies as they're supposed to, joyously

celebrating the atmosphere of sexuality and their own permitted gratification. Of course. Their genes ensure that.

In his book "The Naked Ape", Desmond Morris commented that he might as easily have called it "The Sexy Ape", for our sexuality is as fundamental a part of us as our skeletons. We are big bonobos. It's not our fault. We aren't to blame. It's simply as we are. By definition therefore it can't be wrong. Sure, in this crowded, nervous world, all of us must control it. But we should celebrate those occasions when it is, by consensus, allowed to explode.

Actually, this inequality is a bigger issue than nudity. Why in other respects do women have their needs better supported than men? Why have men become second-class citizens in some areas?

You doubt? Well, here are a few things to mull over: Take British-produced television (not talking about foreign imports). We finally struggled out of mid-twentieth century censorship in the 1980s. When characters needed to be naked, they were. But now? Well it depends it seems. If we're talking about a man's bottom, that seems to be OK, indeed it happens all the time. But strange how few women walk naked away from the camera.

Let's continue.

Try advertising. When aimed at "the modern woman", how often are their men dolts? "I can do without him, but hands off my Ford / Peugeot / whatever". What about health care? Women are offered women's-problems health checks all their adult lives. My wife gets called for checks regularly. But men? Where are the institutionalised, routine checks for prostate and testicular cancer? If I fear troubles I have to make a doctor's appointment and persuade him to give me tests. I've already lost friends to prostate cancer. I have a couple more currently suffering from it. Last year one of my friends had a terrible time with testicular cancer, it got to his lungs would you believe!

Equal mean equal. It doesn't mean swapping one kind of imbalance with another. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. That's only fair.

I know that in some areas, some women feel there is still a long way to go before they are properly equal. But I was around before female emancipation and I know for certain that things have changed beyond all recognition.

When I went into my first job at the beginning of the 1960s, for the same job women were routinely paid about 2/3 of what men were paid, based only on their gender. I worked in an engineering factory with about 5,000 people, nearly all men, the women

possibly making up around 5% of the work force. The offices were in amongst the workshops. In order to get to a toilet you had to walk along the corridors between the workshops. When a woman went to the toilet, she was subjected to hoots and whistles the whole way there and again on her way back. Always. Every time. I was there for five years and the men never missed an opportunity once. The ribaldry wasn't unfriendly nor particularly outrageous, but it must have been very intimidating. By today's standards it sounds like a parody, but it isn't, it really was like that. Take it from me, things have dramatically changed.

Equality For Women has delivered much to women and therefore to us all. But it has been done with little understanding about its impact on men. There's a seam of bewilderment amongst men because they don't understand what's happened to them over the past half century as their natural instincts have been forcibly repressed. It is time for more depth, for a better integration of male anthropology into society.

Equal means equal. We'll know when we get there, when a group of amateur theatre enthusiasts puts on "The Full Fonty" in a small provincial town, in guilt-free enjoyment and peace

John Hedges